

# The Life Histories and Psychological Profiles of 59 Incestuous Stepfathers

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Incest is both more common and more severe in stepparent families. The reasons for this have been unclear. In this comparison of 59 incestuous stepfathers, 70 incestuous biological fathers, and 158 offenders against unrelated children, there were few substantial differences in psychological characteristics between fathers and stepfathers, but their life histories and marital histories differed significantly. Stepfathers were significantly more likely to have prior convictions for sexual offenses, to have been sexually abused as a child, and to have juvenile criminal records. Stepfathers were more likely to have histories of previous marital failure. There was great heterogeneity of psychological characteristics. Increased prevalence in incest in stepfamilies is probably related to interactions between stepfathers' psychopathology, problems inherent in stepfamilies, and the availability of a potential victim.

It has become increasingly apparent that incest is both more common and more severe in stepparent families. In a random survey of 930 women, Russell<sup>1</sup> found that 2 percent of the biological daughters and 17 percent of stepdaughters reported sexual contact with their father or stepfather. Finkelhor<sup>2</sup> found that incest was four to five times more common in stepparent families. In addition to the increased risk of incest, girls

in stepparent families were also more likely to be victimized by other men, especially friends of their stepfather. Both Russell<sup>3</sup> and Avery-Clark *et al.*<sup>4</sup> pointed out the frequency with which sexually abused girls were also physically abused. Daly and Wilson<sup>5</sup> reported significantly increased risk of all forms of child abuse in both single parent and stepparent homes. The risk of physical abuse subsided with increasing age of children, but the increased risk of sexual abuse did not.

Stepfamilies are significantly different from biological families in many ways. Second marriages in which there are stepchildren tend to be less satisfying and more subject to divorce than second marriages without stepchildren.<sup>6</sup> Most studies indicate that, in general, young children in stepparent families tend to be competent and have good family re-

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relationships, while adolescent children have a more varied experience.<sup>7-10</sup> Stepfather-stepchild relationships tend to be poorer than stepmother-stepchild relationships.<sup>11,12</sup> Mothers who bring children to a second marriage often have had life experiences that may impair their role performance.<sup>5,13</sup> Stepfathers have their unique problems, which have been poorly studied.<sup>10</sup> Sustained contact early in life has been shown to inhibit later sexual or marital interest. Parker and Parker<sup>14</sup> have demonstrated a correlation between lack of participation in early care of a child and later incest with that child, regardless of whether the perpetrator was a biological or stepfather.

To date, studies of the psychological characteristics of abusive stepfathers and fathers have demonstrated few clear differences between the two. Neither Pantou<sup>15</sup> nor Goff and Hubble<sup>16</sup> found significant differences between the mean Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) profiles of biological and stepfather sex offenders. Scott and Stone<sup>17</sup> found more antisocial profiles among incestuous stepfathers, and they described the biological fathers as more likely to be passive-aggressive and manipulative. Descriptions of the dynamics of incestuous families have sometimes noted the number of stepfamilies but generally have not discriminated between biological and stepfamilies.<sup>18-24</sup>

In the study of complex interpersonal interactions such as incest, only limited inferences can be drawn from examination of the perpetrator alone. Nonetheless, the relative lack of information about the life history and psychological

characteristics of stepfathers justifies a cautious effort to explain the greater number of incest offenders among these men. This study takes advantage of a large sample of incest offenders and a data base of unusual consistency and detail to study the life histories and psychological characteristics of 59 incestuous stepfathers and to compare them with 70 incestuous biological fathers and 158 extrafamilial offenders against children.

## Methods

**Subjects** Subjects were 59 stepfathers, 70 biological fathers and 158 offenders against unrelated children under age 14, drawn from a sample of 611 convicted sex offenders seen for presentence evaluation at the Intensive Treatment Program for Sexual Aggressives (ITPSA), St. Peter, MN, between July 1975 and September 1984. ITPSA is a locked prison-diversion treatment program for sex offenders that also provides presentence evaluations for courts throughout the state. Statutes mandating evaluation and treatment have changed somewhat during the 10-year life of the program, but most subjects had felony convictions for rape, incest, or extrafamilial child molesting. ITPSA has gathered biographical data, offense descriptions, and psychological test results according to a consistent protocol throughout the life of the program. Social, sexual, and offense histories were gathered by interview and review of records, using a structured schedule in anticipation of future harvesting of data for annual summaries and research. Infor-

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mation sources included offender's self report, police records, victims' statements, and reports of previous evaluations. Self-report information was corroborated by police records or interviews with family members when possible. Psychological testing was also consistent throughout the history of the program; the MMPI was administered routinely.

**Method** Information was encoded from reports generated during the clinical evaluation. The clinical data file includes more than 50 variables per subject.<sup>25</sup> The variables used in this analysis are noted in Table 1. Descriptions of age and sex of victims and the perpetrators' stated sexual preference were also utilized. The records of all incestuous biological or stepfathers were included, with the ages of victims ranging into the upper teens. The records of men whose victims were not their own children and

whose victims were under age 14 were also included. Extrafamilial offenders with victims aged 14 to 18 were not included in order to focus the comparison on offenses against younger victims. In addition to usual scoring of MMPI scales and of group means, scores were analyzed in terms of peak two-point code types. The distribution of different clinical characteristics and MMPI two-code types was compared across the three groups, utilizing chi-square analysis.

## Results

Patterns of victim choice in terms of age and sex were no different for stepfathers than fathers (Table 2). The relative risk to male children was higher before the teen years and outside the family setting. Nearly all the men who victimized males described themselves

**Table 1**  
**Clinical Characteristics of Incestuous Fathers, Incestuous Stepfathers, and Extrafamilial Child Molesters**

Clinical Variable	Biological Fathers (N = 70)		Stepfathers (N = 59)		Extrafamilial Offenders (N = 158)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Race white	61	87.1	58	98.3	143	90.5
Mean IQ	107		108		103	
Churchgoer	19	27.1	10	16.9	39	22.6
Chemical dependency	43	61.4	29	50.0	87	55.0
Marital status*						
Married	46	65.7	51	86.4	48	30.3
Separated/divorced	23	32.8	8	13.5	25	15.8
Single	1	1.4	0		85	53.7
Abused as a child						
Physical only	10	14.2	10	16.9	22	13.9
Sexual†	11	15.7	14	23.7	24	15.1
Total	21	29.9	24	40.6	46	29.1
Juvenile record‡	7	10.0	17	28.8	59	37.3

\* Comparison of fathers with stepfathers: chi-square = 7.64, *df* 2, *p* < .05; † chi-square = 3.53, *df* 2, *p* = .05; ‡ chi-square = 17.64, *df* 2, *p* < .001.

**Table 2**  
**Number of Male, Female, and Multiple Victims in Index Offense**

	Biological Father (N = 70)		Stepfather (N = 59)		Extrafamilial (N = 225)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Male</b>						
0-10 yrs	5		4		23	
11-13 yrs	1		4		24	
14-18 yrs	1		1		14	
Total	7	10.0	9	15.2	61	27.1*
<b>Female</b>						
0-10 yr	15		8		68	
11-13 yrs	25		26		37	
14-18 yrs	20		15		52	
Total	60	86.7	49	83.0	157	69.7†
<b>Both</b>						
0-10 yrs	2		0		5	
11-13 yrs	1		1		1	
14-18 yrs	0		0		1	
Total	3	4.2	1	1.6	7	3.1

\* Chi-square = 3.6, *df* 2, not significant; † chi-square = 21.5, *df* 2,  $p < .001$ .

as homosexual or bisexual. Most of these men had histories of other homosexual experience as well. The small number of offenders who molest children of both sexes has not been previously reported.

Fewer stepfathers than biological fathers were separated or divorced at the time of evaluation (Table 1). Religious affiliation and activity proved not to be a sure preventive to incest, with a substantial number of all three groups describing themselves as religiously active. No religious denomination was particularly overrepresented or underrepresented.

Substance abuse and dependency was high in all groups, and closely resembles previously reported prevalence figures for several criminal groups.<sup>26,27</sup> Incest offenders were more likely than extrafamilial offenders to use alcohol only.

Physical disabilities were more com-

mon among incest offenders (8 of 129) than among extrafamilial offenders (1 of 158), with equal numbers of fathers and stepfathers affected. About half of these disabilities were deformities or injuries of the back. Others included serious heart, kidney, and skin diseases.

Few incest offenders had a prior record of incest, although prior sex offenses were noted, especially among stepfathers and extrafamilial offenders. Eleven biological fathers, 20 stepfathers, and 59 extrafamilial offenders had some prior sex offense conviction (chi-square = 10.7, *df* 2,  $p < .01$ ). The most instructive finding is that there are no significant differences among fathers, stepfathers, and extrafamilial offenders in terms of nonsexual criminal history. Thirteen biological fathers, 7 stepfathers, and 27 extrafamilial offenders had such a record.

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Evidence for abusive and disruptive family life as a child was high, with one third of the biological fathers and one half of the stepfathers and extrafamilial offenders reporting having been physically or sexually abused as children. Stepfathers and extrafamilial offenders were significantly more likely to report sexual abuse in childhood, although the frequency of physical abuse was equal. Stepfathers and extrafamilial child molesters were significantly more likely to have juvenile records, a measure that, in other analyses of ITPSA data, we have found to be highly predictive of recidivism as an adult.

Valid MMPI profiles were obtained from 53 biological fathers, 45 stepfathers, and 135 extrafamilial child molesters. Forty of the 45 theoretically possible different MMPI two-point code profile types were generated, demonstrating a considerable heterogeneity of psychological characteristics. This heterogeneity is typical of the MMPIs of sex offenders of all types.<sup>28</sup> Sixty percent of profile peak scales included scale 4, called the psychopathic deviate scale, which measures antisocial and amoral traits. No profile type accounted for more than 15 percent of any offense group. Twenty percent of subjects had test results within the normal range. The proportion of normal-range MMPI scores was higher for incest offenders. The mean MMPI profile for biological fathers (Welsh code 4'862759310) was less disordered than was the mean profile for either stepfathers (Welsh code 48'76293510) or extrafamilial offenders (Welsh code 48'75290301). There were

no significant differences between MMPI profiles of offenders against male victims and those of offenders against females. MMPI profiles that included peak elevation of scale 5, which measures problems with sexual identity and role, were seen in more than 10 percent of each group, an incidence dramatically in excess of usual expectation. Profiles usually associated with oddness of thought, social isolation, and impulsive violence (Code type 48/84) were also increased in frequency compared with published studies of both psychiatric and criminal populations.<sup>28</sup> These profiles were significantly ( $p < .10$ ) more common among extrafamilial offenders. Fifteen percent of these men had such profiles compared with six percent of intrafamilial offenders. Biological fathers had significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more profiles typically associated with chronic anger and marital conflict. These profiles (Code type 43/34) were only half as frequent among extrafamilial offenders and did not occur at all among the stepfathers. Stepfathers had significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more profiles (14.7% of total) associated with a tendency to alternate between obsessive brooding and impulsive acting out (Code type 47/74). This profile was seen in only one biological father and in five percent of extrafamilial offenders. Seven percent of biological and stepfathers had profiles that described tendencies to passivity and the use of physical symptoms to influence others (Code type 13/31). This profile occurred significantly less, only once, among the extrafamilial offenders ( $p < .05$ ). Profiles typically associated with a diagnosis

of antisocial personality and impulsive criminal behavior (Code type 49/94) occurred with equal frequency in all three groups and were seen in 6.7 to 8.8 percent of cases.

### Discussion

Although we have shown that incest may occur in the absence of discernable criminal history or measurable personality disturbance, the majority of these men have childhood histories, personality traits, and alcohol use patterns that identify them as vulnerable to impulsive or deliberate misbehavior, including physical and sexual assault. In terms of severity of psychopathology as measured by the proportion of normal psychological test scores, the ITPSA sample appears to lie between that found in community settings<sup>16,17</sup> and those found in incarcerated settings.<sup>15,29</sup> The personality differences demonstrated among fathers, stepfathers, and extrafamilial offenders are significant but not very substantial. All three groups display personality traits associated with serious difficulty in interpersonal relationships and tendencies to act on their feelings in destructive ways. They give further evidence of these traits in their documented criminal history. Biological fathers are, on average, less schizoid than the others. Both biological and stepfathers show more MMPI profiles usually associated with the use of symptoms or emotions to influence others, whereas the extrafamilial offenders appear more openly assaultive in their MMPI traits. We suspect that the larger number of normal-range MMPI profiles in all incest cases

reflects, in part, a lower threshold occasioned by the ready availability of a potential victim. Eighty-eight percent of all handicapped perpetrators, unemployed and likely to be at home for long periods, offended in the home. We have been unable to distinguish any psychological influences that could be attributed to their disability. What is distinctive is their greater access to potential victims. Men who are sexually attracted to children but do not live with children must be more predatory in order to find victims, and those who do so are likely to be more deviant.

Our findings must be interpreted with an awareness of methodological restrictions and sample characteristics that are inherent in the study of criminal populations.<sup>30</sup> Samples are limited to families in which incest has been detected or to the retrospective self-report of individuals who have been victims during their childhood.<sup>1-3</sup> Family characteristics, difficult to quantify in any case, are deeply influenced by the exposure of the offense. The degree of psychopathology shown by offenders varies with the setting from which the sample is drawn. Community-based studies show lower degrees of pathology than do those from incarcerated or hospitalized settings.<sup>15,16,29</sup> Information provided by an accused perpetrator is frequently distorted, and the most that can be expected is that the risk of self-serving explanations is equal among groups under comparison.

It is probable that the increased prevalence of incest in stepfamilies can be traced to interactions among the stepfa-

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thers' personality defects, the problems of stepparent families, especially those made up of individuals with previous histories of abuse and marital failure, and the availability of a potential victim. Robinson<sup>10</sup> listed frequently occurring problems that are unique to stepfathers. These are uncertainty about the degree of authority they have in the role of father, uncertainty about the amount of affection to give stepchildren and ways of showing it, conflicts from previous marriage, risk of sexual attraction, discipline of stepchildren and enforcement of rules, loyalty conflicts, money conflicts, and conflict over surname. They also lack early caretaking experience with their stepchildren, an important factor in bonding and protection against incest.<sup>14</sup>

Conflicts from previous marriage are of special interest in the study of incestuous stepfathers. In an earlier unpublished study of 38 members of this sample we found that two thirds of the stepfathers had themselves been previously married. The majority of these marriages had ended in the wife's initiating separation and divorce, often after an affair with another man. Their second marriages, during which the incest took place, were no more satisfactory. The experiences and feelings that set the stage for the initiation of incest began in the previous marriage and were reinforced by conflict and unfaithfulness in the ensuing marriage. Although there was significant marital conflict in the biological incest families, this repeated experience of rejection by marital partners had not occurred.

In these incestuous families sexual attraction between stepfather and stepchild was unhindered by any incest taboo. We have seen several incestuous stepfathers who molested stepchildren but did not molest their own children who also were living in the home. We have not seen an instance of a father in a blended family who molested his own child rather than his stepchild. Lightcap *et al.*<sup>31</sup> also found that abusive stepfathers tended to spare their own children within the same household. For men who are opportunistic and eager to justify their actions, the perceived absence of an incest taboo is often actively permissive. Also, a stepparent incest is likely to occur within one or two years of the marriage, without time for the development of affectionate relationships with stepchildren that might serve to counterbalance the impulse for sexual abuse.<sup>14</sup> Also, the risk period for incest in biological families extended beyond separation and divorce, with sexual contact occurring during visitations. Few of these stepfathers maintained any social contact with stepchildren from either of the most recent or previous marriages, once the marriage broke up.

The role of wives and mothers in incest has been poorly quantified but is intuitively important, especially in coming to understand the lapses of parental concern reflected by increased risk in stepfamilies. Women who have themselves been the victims of abuse appear to be more likely to end up as mothers of abused daughters.<sup>20, 32</sup> A woman, possibly with a history of abuse herself, who has experienced marital failure and the

rigors of single parenthood and who has the poor judgment to enter a second marriage to a personality-disordered alcoholic may also be more likely to ignore or perpetuate circumstances that foster incest than her counterpart in biological incest families. Bastani and Kentsmith<sup>33</sup> reported on experience in psychotherapy with wives of sexual deviants, none of whom were incest offenders. They described the women as using denial, intellectualization, isolation of affect, and undoing as psychological defenses. Garrett and Wright<sup>34</sup> felt that the wives of sex offenders whom they studied tended to take martyr roles, maintaining emotional dominance over their spouses through guilt. Scott and Stone<sup>17</sup> demonstrated that the mean MMPI profile of 44 mothers of incest victims was within the normal range. The prevalent two-point code types suggested what the authors referred to as dissociative phenomena consistent with the theme that, by their emotional absence, these mothers directly or indirectly encouraged the incestuous activity. Although they distinguished the MMPI profiles of biological and stepfathers, they unfortunately did not identify those mothers who were in stepparent marriages.

In summary, explanations for increased frequency of incest in stepparent families do not appear to lie with the personalities of abusive stepfathers. They are little different from incestuous biological fathers, and they show the typical range and variety of offender characteristics.<sup>28</sup> Their life histories, however, indicate important differences. In this sample, at least, they were more

likely to have had a disturbed childhood in which they were sexually abused. They were much more likely to have experienced a previous failed marriage, and they married women who had experienced marital failure. Two important pieces of the puzzle are missing from our data. They are the number of mothers in stepfamilies who had themselves been abused and the number of victims in stepfamilies who had also been abused in their families of origin. We suspect that both figures would be high. In order to fully understand the incest risk factors in stepparent families, it will be necessary to assess, in addition to the personalities of the offenders, their childhood history, the impact of previous marital failure, the relative contribution of the mothers, the possible influence of a potential victim with a past history of having been abused, the unique stresses of stepfamily formation, and the interactions of various combinations of these factors. Studies such as the present one and that of Scott and Stone<sup>17</sup> represent first steps in this direction.

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